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SUBJECT: MFA ON THE PEACE PROCESS, ISRAEL, IRAN AND SUDAN

Classified By: Political M/C Alice G. Wells for reasons 1.4 (b/d).

11. (Summary): MFA Middle East and North Africa Department Director Sergey Vershinin told us on April 28 that the GOR envisioned the proposed May 11 UNSC ministerial on the Middle East as a general discussion of the situation in the region and a chance to reiterate the Security Council's support for the peace process. Urging the Secretary's participation, Vershinin described the draft Presidential Statement as a general document that should not draw Israeli opposition. He described DFM Saltanov's April visit to Israel as a chance to take the pulse of the new government and discuss bilateral relations that are "intensifying." Vershinin complained that Netanyahu had "emasculated" the Palestinians and diminished the chances for a viable Palestinian state, but held out hope that governing would lead to greater pragmatism. He was pessimistic about success in talks between the Palestinian factions, and reiterated that it was necessary to engage Hamas since it controlled Gaza. Vershinin said that satisfying Israeli concerns about Iran factored prominently into Moscow's discussions with Tel Aviv, and explained that the Russian proposal for a Gulf security organization was intended to provide the region with assurances regarding Iranian intentions. The GOR is interested in possible consultations on Sudan between Special Envoy Gration and Russian envoy Margelov. End summary.

Proposed UNSC Ministerial on the Middle East

12. (C) Urging the Secretary's participation, MFA Middle East Department Director Vershinin explained to us on April 28 that FM Lavrov envisioned the proposed May 11 UNSC ministerial meeting on the Middle East as a short discussion among Security Council members of the general situation in the Middle East and status of the MEPP. The proposed Presidential Statement would be a general document reiterating UNSC support for a two state solution, the Quartet principles, and the need for continued discussions between Tel Aviv and the Palestinian Authority. Vershinin thought the draft document, which was still being worked in New York, was innocuous enough so as not to alarm the Israelis or Arab states. Russia also proposed holding a Quartet meeting either the same day or day after the UNSC ministerial, but did not want to mix its UNSC ministerial with a meeting with the Quartet's Arab partners. The GOR would also look for support for its proposed Moscow Middle East conference, for which "all sides" have said they are ready, according to Vershinin. He expressed concern that upcoming U.S. meetings with Arab leaders may presage a U.S.-hosted multilateral event, and urged U.S. reaffirmation of support for the Moscow conference.

Russia Getting to Know Israeli Government

13. (C) Vershinin explained that DFM Saltanov's April visit to Israel was intended to get a sense of the new government, and

he met with PM Netanyahu, FM Lieberman, and National Security Advisor Arad, among others. Vershinin commented on the difficulty the new government faced, and the difficulty in getting a grasp on the direction it would take, because of the size and makeup of a potentially unwieldy coalition that included the Labor Party leader as Minister of Defense. Vershinin commented that FM Lieberman brought both positives and negatives to the new government, and considered him pragmatic despite the FM's often harsh rhetoric. Saltanov's visit also focused on bilateral relations, which Vershinin characterized as "intensifying" on both the political and economic fronts.

¶4. (C) Vershinin said that Russia's proposal for a UNSC ministerial was a topic of several of Saltanov's conversations in Tel Aviv, as was the proposed Moscow Middle East conference. Vershinin was mildly dismissive of Israeli concerns about holding the ministerial, commenting that Israel was "very sensitive" about any international conference or meeting on the MEPP or the situation in the Middle East. Russia's intensive lobbying of Lieberman helped produce Israeli support for the UNSC ministerial.

Netanyahu Has "Emasculated" the Palestinians

¶5. (C) Vershinin was particularly critical of Netanyahu for combining ambiguous statements on prospects for a two state solution with harsh polemics, policies, and caveats that have "emasculated" the Palestinians and all but eliminated the chances for a viable Palestinian state. Israel has not allowed adequate funding, aid deliveries or security

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assistance to the PA. The situation was especially acute in Gaza, which was in much worse condition than it was before the recent Israeli military incursion against Hamas. Vershinin held out hope that the vigors of governing, combined with international pressure, would produce more pragmatic policies.

Hamas and Hizbollah

¶6. (C) Vershinin was pessimistic about the chances for success in the Egyptian-led dialogue between the PA and Hamas, which could not go on indefinitely. He reiterated that although Hamas did not appear willing to recognize the Quartet principles, it was still necessary to engage this organization that was a "reality that cannot be ignored" because of its physical control of Gaza. He pushed for U.S. tolerance of a Palestinian unity government that endorsed the Quartet principles, even if the position of Hamas officials remained ambiguous. Vershinin compared Hamas and Hizbollah, which were outgrowths of the poor political and economic situations in Palestine and Lebanon rather than purely Iranian constructions. He explained that when his Lebanese interlocutors complain that Hizbollah is an Iranian product, he counters that Hizbollah is a Lebanese creature that, judging from its electoral success, has significant support among the Lebanese people. Hamas is similarly a product of conditions in the occupied territories.

Iran

¶7. (C) Vershinin acknowledged the shadow cast by Iran on Israeli politics, which presented a "big problem" for Russia. DFM Saltanov sought to satisfy Israeli concerns over Iran during bilateral conversations, although he did not go beyond Russian talking points that it would limit arms sales to defensive systems that do not destabilize the regional balance. He expressed appreciation for the Secretary's recent statement that progress on Iran and Palestine had to go "hand in hand," and agreed with the message that S/E Mitchell delivered to Middle East leaders that we have to

move quickly on the MEPP in order to avoid an incident in the region that could have unpredictable results. Vershinin reiterated that Russia sees Iran as a "major player in the region" that is also looking for signals regarding the new Israeli government's intentions. Iran also needs to provide assurances to its neighbors, which, Vershinin explained, was the main reason for including Iran in the GOR proposal to form a Gulf security organization, an idea that has been floated by Russian officials during visits to the region but not yet been fleshed out.

Sudan

18. (C) Vershinin expressed the GOR's interest in a visit to Moscow by Special Envoy for Sudan Gration, which would allow for consultations with the Russian President's envoy to Sudan, Mikhail Margelov, who is Chairman of the Federation Council's International Affairs Committee. Vershinin said that Margelov and the MFA cooperated on Sudan, but that the envoy handled the political side while the MFA "did the work."
BEYRLE